

'The people's Parliament' from EUROPE

Caption: The magazine EUROPE, published by the Delegation of the European Commission to the United States, presents to its American readership the distinctive features of the European Parliament, in particular those concerning its composition, its operation and its powers and responsibilities.

Source: EUROPE. Magazine of the European Union. Dir. of publ. Hélin, Willy ; REditor Guttman, Robert J. July/August 2001, No 408. Washington, DC: Delegation of the European Commission to the United States. ISSN 0191-4545. "The people's Parliament", auteur:Osborn, Alan , p. 22-24.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_people_s_parliament_from_europe-en-06df13d6-b718-4a3c-abe4-a83efacbe474.html

Last updated: 27/05/2014

The people's Parliament

By Alan Osborn

You might well think that the remarkable thing about the European Parliament (EP) is not that it works well but that it works at all. Think how hard this is. Here is an assembly of 626 parliamentarians drawn from fifteen different countries, scores of political parties, and using eleven languages. Its members span the ideological spectrum from communists to neo-fascists. Its work is spread out over three cities in three different countries. There's no other institution like it anywhere in the world.

If the EP was just a debating shop or consultative body, none of this might matter. But it isn't. It might be overdoing it to say that European citizens eagerly hang on every utterance from the EP, but a far worse mistake would be to disregard the assembly as lacking in power or influence. Not quite a true parliament yet, perhaps. It can't declare war or raise taxes. It ranks lower in public esteem than national parliaments. But it can affect the lives of the EU's 370 million citizens in countless ways, and its authority is growing all the time.

Who are they, then, these 626 members of the European Parliament (MEPs)? Each EU country is allocated a specified number determined roughly by population so that Germany has ninety-nine; the United Kingdom, France, and Italy have eighty-seven each; and so on down to tiny Luxembourg with six. The representatives are elected under the voting procedures that apply in their own countries and are usually members of national political parties. However, in the EP assembly the parties form groups with like-minded delegations from other countries and tend to vote in multinational blocs according to political slant.

There's been a "rightist" majority in the EP for more than eighteen months now, but it's not always easy to explain to American readers precisely how this differs from the socialist majority that preceded it. By US standards the mainstream European political parties are all a bit leftist. The main center-right group, the European People's Party with 232 members, tends to favor a more business friendly agenda than their opponents, but they are seldom willing to challenge the lavish social security systems that most European countries take for granted. In practice the EPP and their main opponents, the Socialist Group with 180 seats, frequently agree with each other, especially when matters like European integration and the Parliament's own powers are under consideration.

Since its creation in the present form in 1979, the EP has steadily increased its powers. A major leap forward was provided by the Amsterdam Treaty, which came into effect in 1999. The EP now has an equal say, or co-decision, with the EU government ministers over a range of thirty-eight policies, including the EU budget, the single market, the environment (except where taxation is involved), transport, consumer, and some social legislation.

When the EP and the ministers disagree over policy, a process known as "conciliation," where delegations from each side sit down together to negotiate a compromise, comes into play. In recent years this has produced a raft of important legislation covering genetically modified food, cigarette advertising, tire safety, and automobile emissions, among other things. Conciliation is now the more or less normal way of conducting business.

Because of the complexities of the procedures, the constant need for translation and the somewhat oblique way in which power is expressed, the ability of an individual member to sway the house with a devastating speech is limited. The EP's history shows few, if any, examples of minds being changed by a single intervention. That's not to say that personal crusades can never succeed. The EU ban on baby sealskin imports and the crackdown on auto emissions show this can be done. But it usually takes political savvy rather than inspiring rhetoric to achieve it.

Like any parliament, the EP has its share of people whose whole lives are devoted to politics.

The present intake includes a sprinkling of former prime ministers (including the ex-president of the

European Commission Jacques Santer), senior political worthies, and successful businessmen and women.

But more colorful figures are the former student revolutionary leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit; the two Northern Ireland adversaries, Nobel Peace Prize laureate John Hume and the Reverend Ian Paisley; and Dana, the Irish vocalist who has lived in the US in recent years. Other MEPs include the former commander of the UNPROFOR military forces in Bosnia, Philippe Morillon; the Italian mountain climbing pioneer, Reinhold Messner; and also from Italy two distinguished anti-Mafia campaigners, Giuseppe di Lello Finuoli and Antonio di Pietro. Up-and-coming members include Pat Cox, the Irish leader of the Liberals, and Heidi Hautala, the Finnish leader of the Greens.

Prior to 1979 the EP was sometimes seen as a kind of lavish “retirement home” for former politicians who had served their time in domestic affairs, and its reputation suffered accordingly. Since the introduction of direct elections in that year, however, the average age of members has fallen; more women have been elected; and a sharper, more professional focus has emerged.

Yet, the EP has never enjoyed great popularity among EU citizens. In large part this is because it is often the butt of attacks by those whose real target is the European Union itself. But the EP has also attracted criticism on grounds of financial cost.

Perhaps the most insistent charge arises from the requirement that the EP maintain three bases: the French city of Strasbourg, where the formal monthly sittings are held; Brussels, where the political parties have their headquarters and where most committee meetings take place; and Luxembourg, where part of the administration as well as the library is located. The constant shuffling of staff, documents, and equipment between the three cities results in a huge charge on the EP budget as well as a heavy physical and mental strain on MEPs and their staffs. Unhappily, it is not within the EP’s power to alter this. The three sites are tenaciously protected by the countries concerned, and the arrangement can only be changed by a treaty amendment.

For all that, the EP is now a potent force in EU decision-making. The scores of corporate and special interest lobbyists who turn up in Strasbourg every month are proof of that. No one expects the EP to take the place of national parliaments in the foreseeable future, but every five years or so it takes a clear and irreversible step forward in power and influence.

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